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ABSTRACT

Education will become the functioning instrument of a stable democracy by being in all its stages and dimensions an example of the democratic process. Within this framework, the desegregation of our schools can proceed; and with the desegregation of our schools, we can achieve that more difficult stage--the true integration of our schools. The struggle to extend American democratic ideals to the nonwhite groups in America has been continuous, albeit irregular in its progress. This struggle may be viewed as the main theme of American history. From this perspective, the following emerge as dominant qualities in American history: (1) the articulation of democratic ideals and aspirations as the foundation of the American political system provided and continues to provide a powerful basis for the struggle to realize these ideals; (2) various groups of Europeans who have migrated to America have benefitted from the American system of democracy; (3) built into the American political and educational system are safeguards against the more flagrant forms of governmental tyranny and abuse; (4) the continuous struggle of the descendants of African slaves in America to make the promises of the American democratic system real for them has not been without some significant successes; and, (5) no democratic gains achieved by black Americans have been restricted to blacks alone. These gains have strengthened democracy for all Americans. (Author/JM)

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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND POPULAR EDUCATION

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revolution · continuity · promise

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Nearly two hundred years ago Thomas Jefferson stated the moral basis for the establishment of an independent United States of America: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." This assertion of the equality of man was not in itself new. It had its religious roots in the Judaeo-Christian attempts to control the more primitive impulses of man by identifying religion with man's responsibility for his fellow man. The principle probably had its most systematic philosophical roots in the seventeenth-century rationalism of John Locke, which laid the foundation for political democracy upon the premise that every human being entered this world as a blank slate *(tabula rosa)* and that all were therefore equal. Locke's insistence that whatever differences were found among groups of human beings had to be explained by postnatal experiential and environmental differences may be viewed as the rationale for the democratic demands and revolutions that have dominated the world since his time. The idea of the inherent equality among human beings marked the end of the doctrine of the divine rights of kings and a significant stage in the disintegration of the feudal world.

When man began to believe that all human beings were potentially equal and that differences in status were neither ordained by God nor biologically determined, then man could look to remedy existing inequalities and injustices by controlling and manipulating the environment. This is probably one of the

most revolutionary ideas ever to take hold in the human mind. Not only Thomas Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers of the American Revolution, not only the architects of the French Revolution, but also Marx and Engels, even perhaps Lenin, and more recently Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and other fighters for racial and economic justice in America and throughout the world—all have been influenced by the seventeenth-century egalitarian philosophy of John Locke.

It is ironic that even as Thomas Jefferson expressed this democratic premise as the basis for the founding of this new nation, his own predicament as a slaveholder and as an apologist for the continuation of slavery in the United States was a symptom of the schizophrenia which continues to afflict the American social and political system. The fact remains, however, that in spite of its many contradictions, the United States was the first nation which asserted its right to independence in moral and ethical rather than economic or military terms. In spite of many violations of its democratic ideals in day-to-day practical politics, the value of America's insistence upon its democratic ideals must not be underestimated. These democratic ideals have provided a motive power for the ongoing and necessary struggle for justice and equality. They continue to provide the foundation for the expansion of democratic public education in the United States. And they have provided critical support for the general civil rights movement which started with the earliest abolitionists, continued through the Emancipation Proclamation, and was intensified in the persistent twentieth-century struggles to eliminate the last vestiges of state-controlled racial inequities.

Probably the earliest problem in reconciling the egalitarian ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence with the existence of human slavery in the New World came to the surface with the controversy about whether the African slaves and their children should be converted to Christianity and be taught to read and to write. This controversy combined both religious and educational issues. Those who opposed the conversion and education of the African slaves tended to support their argument with the assertion that the African slaves were not quite human. Ironically, this unprecedented need to deny full humanity to the African slaves seems to have stemmed from the fact that the white European

slaveholders were themselves Christian. The view that the African slaves were not quite human could be used to exempt white Christians from any sense of guilt over the inevitable cruelties and dehumanization inherent in human slavery, a sense of guilt that would otherwise be commanded by the Christian requirement to love and protect one's fellow human beings. Indeed, books written by clergymen in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century sought to justify slavery by alluding to that part of the Bible wherein God gave man dominion over the beasts of the field. These men of the cloth unashamedly asserted that the beasts of the field included African slaves.

The eighteenth-century Americans who opposed slavery and who argued for conversion and education of the Africans insisted not only that slavery was a basic violation of Christianity, but also that Africans were as human as Europeans. The first civil rights struggle was won when it was decided to convert the slaves to Christianity and to teach some of them to read and write. The fact that the slaves from Africa and their descendants could indeed be taught the same skills Europeans had been taught refuted the basic argument for their sub-humanity and made possible subsequent struggles for the extension of democratic rights to the African slaves and their descendants.

The struggle to extend American democratic ideals to the descendants of the African slaves, to the indigenous native American Indians, and to other nonwhite groups in America has been continuous, albeit irregular in its progress. It has been marked by periods of dynamism and by periods of stagnation. By its nature and its essence, it has been a barometer of the vitality and strength of the democratic system envisioned and articulated by Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, this struggle, which persists up to the present, may be viewed as the main theme within which the complexities and the dimensions of American history can be best understood. From this perspective, the following emerge as dominant qualities in American history:

1. The articulation of democratic ideals and aspirations as the foundation of the American political system provided and continues to provide a powerful basis for the struggle to realize these ideals, in spite of repeated practical violations and continued forms of cruelty and injustice.

2. Various groups of Europeans who have migrated to America seeking economic, political and educational advantages for themselves and their children have benefitted from the American system of democracy. They have been provided with opportunities for improving their status, if not the quality of their lives, because the American democratic system has worked well within certain limits.

3. Built into the American political and educational system are safeguards against the more flagrant forms of governmental tyranny and abuses which would dehumanize individuals and reduce large groups of human beings to the levels of resignation, stagnation and despair which are likely to be found in authoritarian regimes.

4. The continuous struggle of the descendants of African slaves in America to make the promises of the American democratic system real for them has not been without some significant successes. This is true despite the fact that their particular struggle for democracy and equality of opportunity has been fulfilled more slowly than the struggle of white European ethnic groups. Black Americans were released from slavery in the early nineteenth century in the North and in the late nineteenth century in the South. Since emancipation, black Americans have used the federal courts, the Congress, the legislative branches of state government and, in some cases, the authority and the prestige of the President of the United States to protect themselves from more flagrant forms of racial cruelty, rejection and dehumanization.

5. No democratic gains achieved by black Americans have been restricted to blacks alone. These gains have strengthened democracy for all Americans.

Next to the Emancipation Proclamation itself, the *Brown* decision of May 17, 1954 could be viewed as the most significant demonstration that the instruments of the American democratic system can be used effectively in the struggle for racial justice. This historic decision of twenty years ago--in spite of the fact that it has not been fully implemented, and in spite of the growing percentages of black children in racially segregated public schools in such northern urban areas as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Boston, and Los Angeles--nonetheless remains as a monumental reaffirmation of the vitality of the Jeffersonian formu-

lation of American ideals. It demonstrates a democratic and rational alternative to the quest for justice and equality through irrational and inhumane violence. It continues to be an outstanding symbol of the fact that human beings need not accept injustice and social cruelty passively, that they need not succumb to the ultimate condition of total dehumanization—namely, the refusal to struggle for justice and humanity. The *Brown* decision remains a powerful indication that democracy provides not only the basis for hope, but also the instruments for achieving what is hoped for. Those of us who are concerned with the complex interrelationship of democratic politics and popular education find it important that the *Brown* decision dealt specifically with education as the basis of a stable democracy. In his simple and direct decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated:

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education in our democratic society. . . . It is the very foundation of good citizenship.[1]

Certainly the tortuously slow pace of changing the biracial educational system in America into a democratic nonracial system shows that no single decision nor single democratic institution can magically transform deep-seated forces of prejudices, fears, hatreds, anxieties, and conflicts. American racism, especially the reaffirmation of racism in its institutionalized forms, has deep roots in almost every human being brought up under those forms. The depth of American racism makes it difficult for its detrimental consequences to be remedied within society as a whole and within the individuals who have lived according to racist forms.

The problem which must be faced and resolved by those of us who seek to strengthen American democracy—who seek to fulfill the 200-year-old Jeffersonian promise of desegregating American education as a necessary prerequisite to curing society as a whole of the poisons of systematic racism—is to find the formula whereby the individuals who are themselves products of segregated schools, who bear the deep scars of racist indoctrination inherent in racially

[1] Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954).

segregated education, can become agents in protecting their own children from this social disease. This is the critical contemporary problem of the struggle for democratic politics and popular education in America. It is the problem which must be resolved if American democracy is to maintain the vitality necessary to survive.

II

In what follows I have set forth some ideas on the ways in which it might be possible to resolve the tantalizing, elusive problem of how to engage those who are the products of racially segregated schools as agents in transforming the American educational system into a nonracial democratic system—or, at least, to prevent them from serving as obstacles to such transformation and thereby continuing to infect their children with the disease of racism. And let us make no mistake here: racism is a disease.

The first step in this process has already been taken. It is important that the powers of the federal government, particularly the federal courts, continue to be used to make it clear that racially segregated schools not only violate the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, but also are patently in conflict with the principles of the Declaration of Independence and are, as well, a powerful dehumanizing force. There can be no retreat from this essential foundation for the desegregation of American educational institutions. The law must be clear. There must be no equivocation on the part of governmental officials, particularly those charged with the responsibility of clarifying and enforcing the law. The foundation of any democratic system must be respect for the organic law, and officials who enforce the law must do so without favor or prejudice. Indeed, responsible public officials in a stable democracy must interpret, uphold and enforce the laws in spite of their personal attitudes and biases. This is the *sine qua non*.

While recognizing this fact, one must also recognize the paradox that in a democracy in which legislative and executive officials are elected by the majority of the voting citizenry, there

will be temptations on the part of these officials to respond to the wishes and the prejudices of their constituents. Not infrequently, such officials will (under the guise of responding to the democratic will of the people) decide that a practical and pragmatic form of democracy requires the subordination of the rights of minorities to the prejudices of the majority. In my view—and I am not alone—President Nixon is a clear example of an executive who is responsive to (and has even encouraged) the passions and fears of the majority, in racial questions no less than others. This is indeed "the tyranny of the majority." It demonstrates one of the problems so clearly stated by Alexis de Tocqueville in his brilliant analysis of the complexities of the American democratic system—that tyranny is possible not only under feudalism and aristocracy but also under democracy, and the democratic form is the most insidious.

When permitted to operate in accordance with the vision of the Founding Fathers, the American system does in fact provide safeguards against this form of tyranny. These safeguards—these checks and balances—determine whether democracy is real or feigned. They are the democratic gyroscopes. Probably the strongest safeguard, reflecting the wisdom of the Founding Fathers, is to be found in the fact that the federal judiciary is not directly responsible to popular will. The independence of the federal judiciary, together with the fact that the executive and legislative branches of the federal and state governments are directly responsible to their constituents, is one of the most important protections for democracy in the American political system. It is understandable that the initiative in the recent stages in the struggle for racial democracy in America came from the federal courts.

It is a testament to the American democratic system that once the federal courts made it clear that the promises of democracy could not be qualified by arbitrary and irrelevant grounds of race or color, the legislative and executive branches followed suit. The Congress of the United States passed important civil rights legislation in the latter part of the 1950s and the 1960s. In spite of his personal opinions, President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered federal troops to enforce the desegregation decision in Little Rock, Arkansas. President John F. Kennedy, in the later years of his aborted administration, provided an atmosphere of positive

movement toward strengthening civil rights and civil liberties as desirable and long-delayed goals in the fulfillment of American democracy. And were it not for his entanglement in the tragic ambiguities of the purposeless Vietnam War, it would even now be clear that President Lyndon B. Johnson contributed more to racial progress in America than any other President in the 200 years of American history.

The civil rights retrogression in the past six years must therefore be seen as a problem in the moral and ethical leadership of the Nixon administration. Even as one confronts the administration's contribution to stagnation in civil rights progress, one also confronts the complexities of the American political system and the fact that a process, once started, is not easy to stop. The rate of public school desegregation in the seventeen southern states which had laws requiring or permitting racial segregation prior to 1954 has proceeded at an accelerated pace during the Nixon administration. Even as Mr. Nixon was unashamedly seeking the votes of southerners and racially constrictive northern whites, even as he was competing successfully for the votes which ordinarily would have gone to George Wallace for primitive racial reasons, federal governmental officials were applying pressures against southern segregation. And today more than 50 percent of all black children in southern states are in racially desegregated schools.

The most powerful resistance to desegregation in American public schools is now to be found in northern urban communities. It is these cities of the North, which managed to maintain an image of racial liberalism when the intensity of the civil rights struggle was concentrated in the South, that are now the bastions of anti-busing slogans and such code words as "quotas" and "preferential treatment," all clearly designed to maintain the racially discriminatory status quo. Twenty years after the *Brown* decision there are more white and black children in northern cities attending racially segregated schools than there were at the time of the decision. Somehow, white southerners must help northern whites to understand that racially segregated schools not only dehumanize black children but inflict deep, debilitating, and immobilizing moral conflicts upon white children. Somehow, a way must be found to communicate to the majority of white Americans that racially segregated schools in the latter part of the twentieth cen-

tury contaminate their children in many complex, subtle and conflicting ways, impairing their ability to function as morally and intellectually effective human beings. Some way must be found to communicate to the majority of American citizens, white and black, the fact that the continuation of racially segregated schools threatens the very foundations of a stable democratic society for all American citizens.

Ordinarily one would look to religious leaders for the moral and ethical guidance necessary to communicate the ideas of democracy to the American populace. But the organized church in America has defaulted. It has made its peace with practical politics and power, and appears content to give lip service to religious and democratic principles of the brotherhood of man. Indeed, the organized church and its spokesmen appear to be rationalizers for American racism in the tradition of their seventeenth and eighteenth century counterparts.

Because religious leaders have defaulted, one must turn to economic and industrial leaders for moral guidance. It would seem to be clear that the continuation of American racism reinforced by racially segregated schools, particularly in industrial urban centers, would be an economic liability. Racially segregated schools, outcast foster children of the system, produce hundreds of thousands of functional illiterates each year. The victims of this social disgrace are not prepared to become part of a dynamic and growing economy. In the main, they are relegated to the status of income consumers rather than producers. They are consigned to welfare roles, other forms of dependency, and correctional institutions. It would appear that a democratic capitalist economy would put high priority on using economic and financial power to convert this persistent economic and human liability to an asset. There remains, however, a strange timidity on the part of the economic powers to demand the remedy for this pervasive inefficiency. This timidity defies the simplistic interpretations of Karl Marx. Is it possible that a nation which made the critical financial policy decision to use American dollars to rebuild the economies of European nations in the post-World War II years in order to facilitate sound and stable international trade is immobilized by racism from demanding the reorganization of our educational system so that American citizens will be educated to

be constructive members of the society without regard to their race? Is the country that made the capitalist decision which resulted in the implementation and the success of the Marshall Plan and the AID program (particularly for Europe) incapable, because of racism, to make the capitalist decision to use its potential financial and industrial strength to rebuild the blighted areas of American cities and to shore up the education and the economy of all of the underdeveloped groups in the nation itself? If the answer to these questions is yes, then it would follow that American racism is a terminal disease and that the promises of American democracy will not only be withheld from blacks but, being so withheld, will in the end be withheld from all Americans.

In seeking to get the American people to understand the serious threats inherent in the perpetuation of racism and racially segregated schools—and the extent to which the foundations of democracy are based upon nonracial democratic schools—one must look, finally, at the role of educators and those who are responsible for the organization and administration of our educational institutions. These men and women somehow must be made to understand that education is in fact, to recall the chief justice's words, "the most important function of state and local governments . . ." and "the very foundation of good citizenship," and that democratic education is absolutely essential to the perpetuation of a democratic society. Probably the first step in the reorganization of American education for the purpose of stabilizing American democracy and giving vitality to the American political system is for educators to grasp this essential nature of education and to assert it without apology. The goals of education can no longer be defined in terms of transmitting and acquiring mere academic skills. The greatest danger facing contemporary man, not only in America but throughout the world, is the danger of trained intelligence isolated from moral and ethical concerns. Educational institutions in America must find some way to emphasize the fact that a functioning moral and ethical sensitivity is the primary mark of an educated human being.

This sensitivity (which underlies our Declaration of Independence) certainly cannot be obtained in racially segregated schools. But the teaching of moral sensitivity as a primary goal in the educational process at all levels is not restricted to questions

of race. If one could find a way of communicating to the American people the fact that racial cruelties are merely a part of the much larger problem of man's inhumanity to man, then it might be possible to deal more effectively with the problem of racial segregation in American schools. It is imperative to demonstrate to the American people that educational procedures which require children to learn early in the elementary grades that they must compete with their friends and their classmates for grades plant dangerous seeds of inhumanity. There are ways in which standards of excellence and the necessity for each child to achieve his full moral and intellectual potential can be demonstrated without instilling the view that "if *he* gets an A, that takes something away from *me*." There must be ways in which intellectually gifted children can be taught, as an important part of their education, that their gift is a social trust to be used to help others who are less endowed. Attempts to help intellectually gifted children or children with other special and socially desired talents by isolating them from their fellow human beings are, on their face, self-defeating. No human being, no matter how talented, can use his abilities and skills effectively in isolation. To segregate these children from their fellows is to damage them intellectually and morally. Intellectual segregation like racial segregation impairs moral and social effectiveness.

It is my belief that these ideas, and especially the idea of gifts held in trust, somehow must become an integral part of the American educational system. Education will become the functioning instrument of a stable democracy by being in all its stages and dimensions an example of the democratic process. Within this framework, the desegregation of our schools can proceed; and with the desegregation of our schools, we can achieve that more difficult stage—the true integration of our schools whereby they can become instruments to reinforce that understanding and acceptance of our fellow men which gives substance to life. It is my belief that we can communicate to the American people the truth that this moral education is essential not only to American democracy, but also to the survival of the human species. It should be possible to help the American people to understand and act upon the understanding that, to borrow from de Tocqueville, ". . . it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality [democ-

racy] is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or to wretchedness." [2]

Two hundred years of the continuing struggle for democracy in America should make us believe that the struggle eventually will be successful.

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 680.